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**Cultural Studies, Common Sense and Communications: The infra-ordinary, the interdisciplinary and the particular**

This article had its origin in a conference session concerned with the 'mark' which cultural studies has made on the study of communications. However, an important part of that 'marking' is invisible, in so far as it concerns the transformation of the taken-for-granted premises on which the field rests, rather than its manifest contents, explicit methods and observable procedures. The everyday world of common sense, of what 'goes without saying' in any given cultural context, has often been the object of attention for cultural studies, difficult as it is to study in its evanescence (cf. Perec 1999, Morley 2007 on the 'infra-ordinary'). Its importance lies in the fact that while it's very taken-for-grantedness renders common sense invisible, it nonetheless plays a crucial role in defining the limits of what can be thought within a given paradigm.

In the UK at least, up to the point where cultural studies emerged, the received wisdom in much of the field of media and communications was that the principle object of analysis should be the structure of media ownership and control, as once you knew that, you could then predict the nature of most media content, and, given the further presumption of the ubiquity of their power, to further predict the media's probable effects on their audiences. The influence of cultural studies work on the media is perhaps nowhere more apparent today than in the disenthroning of these presumptions.

Nowadays it goes without saying that there is more to the media than questions of economics; that issues of culture, representation and signification are equally important; that we must pay attention not only to questions of class but also of 'race', gender and sexuality; that low-status fictional media forms can play just as important a political role as high-profile news and current affairs television; that the field of the political must be extended to also include its 'popular' and vernacular forms; and that audiences are evidently not passive dupes or zombies. However, if that now seems no more than common sense, this is, as I have argued before,

because cultural studies has, over the subsequent period, made it so (cf. Morley 2002). In the UK, these issues had to be forced onto the research agenda against the background of much wailing and gnashing of teeth on the part of scholars in the more conventional domains of media and communication studies.

Not only has cultural studies media work rewritten the common sense of media studies, but it has also rewritten a number of other disciplines, among them sociology. Stuart Hall always argued that one of the jobs of cultural studies was to do sociology better than the positivistic sociologists ever did. Indeed, when Lévi- Strauss delivered his inaugural lecture at the College of France, he argued that social analysis should be concerned with the 'study of the life of signs at the heart of social life' and defended this enterprise as nothing more nor less than the resumption of the forgotten part of the Durkheim–Mauss program (Hall 1977). It is precisely this tradition that cultural studies has sought to revive – most especially through the re-description of the banal, everyday worlds of mediated cultures in the language of systematic analysis, the better to understand the role of the media in shaping how the limits of our 'public knowledge' are constructed, patrolled and redrawn.

Specifically, this re-framing of communications questions was based on the introduction, from the humanities, of an emphasis on the detailed study of the production of meanings. Certainly, in the UK up to the 1970s, communications still operated with a 'conveyor belt' model of the transmission of media contents, which was impervious to the questions raised by semiology about the imbrication of power in the complex process of the construction of meanings. It was cultural studies' engagement with literary scholarship, semiology and cultural anthropology, which led to the focus on close textual analysis and the critical break with that model of communication.

In intellectual terms, cultural studies has evidently had a phenomenal impact: as a result of its development, most cognate disciplines in the UK have undergone a pronounced 'cultural turn' in recent years – hence the booms in cultural history, cultural geography, cultural sociology, etc. – all of which would seem to show that, in this respect, emulation is the sincerest form of flattery. However, in institutional terms, cultural studies in the UK at least, has faced major difficulties, partly as a

result of the funding pressures (largely exercised through the 'Research Excellence' framework of scrutiny) which increasingly dictate a retreat to more conventional, and more respectable disciplines and their more established journals, where scholars in the field are increasingly under pressure to publish. Thus, there has also been a creeping pressure on people to work on more conventionally recognized areas of the media, which fit more readily into a traditional definition of what is political and of what is 'important'. As a result of these pressures, the field has recently begun to return to its more traditional emphasis on presentation of conventional politics and the 'serious' genres of news and current affairs television, within a framework set by a very masculinised definition of the public sphere – even if this is all now sometimes given a 'modern' twist by an emphasis on the supposed role of the new media in somehow making us all more democratic.

### **Cultural studies as interdisciplinarity**

Let me turn now to what I take to be another of the foundational and defining characteristics of cultural studies, which is its commitment to interdisciplinarity I have sometimes heard anthropologists say that 'anthropology is ethnography, or it is nothing'. But while I have the greatest respect for ethnographic modes of study, I do not think that they – nor any other single discipline or methodological technique – has a monopoly on the truth. Indeed, if I transpose the terms of that anthropological 'cri de coeur' I would say that 'cultural studies is interdisciplinarity, or it is nothing'. In this respect, Graham Murdock argued, long ago, that the original project of cultural studies was precisely to disregard formal divisions between disciplines in 'a celebration of trespass and order violations, in the interests of constructing a more complete analysis of culture' (Murdock 1995, p. 91).

Today, however a lot of work that describes itself as cultural studies is not so much interdisciplinary, but rather more like a re-heated version of a conventional sociology of culture. Indeed, every few years, it seems that we see the same intellectual intervention, where a group of sociologists get the idea that it is time to abandon all the 'old-fashioned', libertarian, messy, interdisciplinary forms of cultural studies and get things re-organized around a properly codified and systematically

theorized sociology of culture (cf. Frith 1991, Alexander and Smith 1993, Smith 2011).

For me, that approach would represent the death, rather than any kind of 'renewal' of what I think cultural studies ought to be. At best, it tends to end up with a kind of high theoretical/philosophical form of abstracted and de- contextualized cultural speculation (about big issues such as globalization/risk society/the new media, etc.). At worst, it results in a kind of abstracted sociology of the postmodern, in which there is an un-interrogated 'We', who live in an un- differentiated global world. Moreover, the presumption is often that this 'we' is increasingly determined by the effects of the 'new media'— which are themselves held to require analysis by means of a kind of reconstituted McLuhanism. From this perspective, the principal concern is then to identify the 'essence' of any particular medium, from which its cultural 'effects' can then be established by a process of philosophical deduction.

### **Grounded theory and the (mis) uses of abstraction**

Of course, in many contexts, theory has long functioned as a kind of 'trump card', viewed as far superior to any position based on merely empirical observation. Indeed, from that point of view, Birmingham cultural studies could only ever have aspired to be seen as 'middlebrow', at best. However, for me, the forms of higher theory which now dominate some parts of the field of cultural studies itself have little to do with the kind of work I am interested in. My kind of cultural studies is committed to the proposition that while theory and abstraction are very powerful analytical tools, without which we would be unable to sort the myriad facts of the world into their significant patterns, they are (rather like a 'power-saw') – not only useful, but also potentially dangerous, as, if not handled carefully, they can easily do more harm than good.

In Stuart Hall's argument, this position is derived from his reading of the 1857 introduction to the 'Grundrisse', where Marx explains that we must begin from the concrete and make analytical and theoretical abstractions from its detail, in order to produce concepts which will better allow us to analyze what is actually happening in the world (Hall 1973). However, he insists, having done so, rather than remaining in

the realm of theory, we must then return to the concrete, to see how useful these theoretical abstractions are in allowing us to understand any particular conjuncture. This commitment to the usefulness of theory (rather than to its value per se) is, to my mind, one of the key things that distinguishes cultural studies from any other approach. Beyond this classical source, one might argue that another element of Birmingham cultural studies was a commitment to a specifically British intellectual tradition. Indeed, years ago, Dick Hebdige prefaced his *Hiding in the Light* book with a quote from William Blake to the effect that 'To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit' whereas 'General Knowledges' are, as Blake rumbustiously puts it, merely 'the Knowledges of Idiots' (Hebdige 1986).

However, there is nothing specifically 'British' about this: Hall's position finds a very strong echo in the work of Michel Serres (Serres and Latour 1995). Like Hall, Serres is trenchantly critical of modes of analysis which try to use a single 'passkey' to open all doors (whether it be Psychoanalytic, Marxist, Semiotic or Deconstructionist). He is fiercely opposed to the reductionism of this kind of universal metalanguage, which, he avers, is too 'comfortable and lazy'. For him, analytical method does not consist of 'marshalling ready-made solutions proffered by a particular method'. Because of the importance which he attaches to singularities and local detail, he argues that we always need a 'customized' method, adapted to the problem at hand – so that 'each time you try to open a different lock, you have to forge a specific key adapted to that purpose'. Nor is this any kind of 'anti-theoretical' position – indeed, Serres' ambition is to achieve 'theoretical elegance' – which he defines as 'making the maximum number of viable deductions from the minimum number of assumptions' (Serres and Latour 1995, pp. 91–2, 96).

Evidently, the same note of caution must also apply in the case of cultural studies itself, if it is not to be treated as yet another universal 'pass key'. Thus, neither cultural studies itself nor the contemporary process of globalization, which is so much the object of current theoretical endeavours, can usefully be understood in abstracted form. British cultural studies has to be recognized as a very specific conceptual apparatus developed for the particular purpose of understanding the dynamics of British culture in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, evidently, we must consider the ways in which that version of cultural studies now needs to be transposed and 'translated'. To put it simply, the question here is how much (or how

little) of what Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams write about the adult experience of working-class white men in England, in the post-war period, can possibly be applicable to people elsewhere in the contemporary world? Although that tradition has subsequently been widely exported to other areas of the globe, its best exponents have always recognized that it should be treated as a particular set of theoretical propositions which, given their very concrete local origins/concerns, stand in need of quite radical translation and adaptation, if they are to be applied to the analysis of other cultures elsewhere.

Similarly, the theoretical object of globalization itself rarely benefits from consideration in the abstract and is much better addressed as a complex set of situated processes, involving contradictory dynamics which play out rather differently in specific cultural settings – hence the argument below, in favour of redeveloping the long unfashionable perspective of ‘area studies’.

### **Questions, problems and futures**

I would identify, telegraphically, three key problems faced by contemporary work in communications – first, a tendency towards media centrism – abstracting the media from the cultural contexts in which they operate; second, a continuing tendency to universalise a EurAmcentric model of modernity; and finally the problem of ‘cultural presentism’ – in relation to the need for a better historical perspective on our contemporary concerns.

### ***Media centrism, techno-determinism and cultural context***

In the field of communications, there is a particular danger posed by a tendency to focus too narrowly on new technology as the prime cause of an irreversible and irresistible transformation of all our lives. In this respect, it is curious how often otherwise sophisticated theoretical perspectives on new technology return to a long discredited model of hypodermic effects, in which these technologies are presumed to have fairly simple and straightforward effects and thus ultimately produce questions which are both banal and unanswerable, such as ‘Did Facebook cause the events of the Arab Spring?’ The further problem with that kind of approach, from my point of view, is not simply its technological determinism, but also its lamentable

media – centrism: its tendency to presume that the media can be understood independently of the cultural contexts in which they operate (Morley 2009, 2012). To be against this kind of media-centric approach is not to deny the importance of media/ communications processes but rather, to insist that we can only fully understand their significance once we set them in their broader context.

### ***EurAmcentrism: area studies and global theory***

In avoiding EurAmcentrism, the discipline of anthropology, as it has turned towards the study of the media in recent years, has a very great deal to offer (Askew and Wilk 2002, Ginsburg et al. 2002, Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005). Media anthropology has alerted us to how very much communications work still operates with models based on the particular experiences of a small number of globally unrepresentative countries – which Jared Diamond (2012) has called the ‘WEIRD’ societies – i. e. Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (cf. also Downing 1996, Curran and Park 2002). To return to what I said earlier about common sense and the limits of thought, the task is not simply to add in, to the conventional Western accounts, a set of exotic examples from the Global South. Rather, as Brian Larkin (2008) puts it, the question is how to explore the forms of what might be, for many of us, ‘un- common’ sense, which operate in non-western contexts, the better to de-centre and de-familiarize the taken-for-granted presumptions of the WEIRD world.

In this connection let me now return to my earlier comments on the inadequacies of ‘Global Grand Theory’: one alternative approach here would be an anthropologically informed and suitably revamped version of area studies. Evidently, in taking a ‘regional’ perspective, one needs to be careful not to align oneself with what Rey Chow (2002) has called a simpleminded anti- theoreticism, which would champion retrograde forms of local empiricism. We may, for good reason, want to avoid models of global abstraction, but then the key question is in what forms ‘areas’ still exist in our supposedly post- geographical world? Evidently, there are serious theoretical problems with how you can operationalise such a perspective without falling back into geographical essentialism. As a result of patterns of migration and media flows, cultures certainly are not necessarily fixed in geographical places in the

ways that they used to be. As Arjun Appadurai (2000) has argued, we should not mistake areas for permanent geographical facts, based on any bedrock of natural or 'civilisational' coherence. However, despite these dangers, this kind of approach does insist on the specificity of expertise to particular conjunctures and on the limits of the applicability of abstract theoretical frameworks to particular cases.

### ***Cultural presentism – the present as a historical phenomenon***

In relation to the dangers of 'presentism', Lynn Spigel (2004) argues that the more we deal in futurism, the more we need a historical perspective, for 'newness' is, above all a historical constant (Marvin 1988, Murdock and Pickering 2008). It is easy to overdraw the contrast between the worlds of the old and the new media (and particularly, between the supposedly zombified audiences of the 'slouchback media' and the hyper-active 'prosumers' of today). Indeed, we see all around us many forms of symbiosis and remediation emerging between technologies with their origins in different eras.

Sometimes, the assumption is now made that ours is a virtual world, in which material geography is irrelevant, if not dead. Rather, I would suggest, the question is precisely how virtual and material geographies are now intertwined in different ways, in a range of cultural settings. Cyberspace itself has a perfectly identifiable geography, as has the Internet industry and many of its networks still rely on material infrastructures constructed long ago. Moreover, where you are (in material and social space) has a determining effect on your access to the virtual world, just as your virtual 'connexity' itself has profound social and material consequences. Ours may be an increasingly mobile world but, as Peter Adey (2006) has remarked 'if mobility is everything, then it is nothing', and we must pay attention to what Doreen Massey (1994) calls the power-geometry of these connections – and disconnections – in both the virtual and the material realms.

There are also difficulties concerning the sense of 'directionality' which is often built into our assumptions about the speed of contemporary technological change: in comparative terms, the increase in rates of mobility and technological change in the late nineteenth century can be argued to have been greater than that of our own era



(Kern 1983, Edgerton 2006). The path forward is neither smooth nor uni-directional: old technologies continually reappear in new guises (Internet radio attracting large numbers of young people to a supposedly 'outdated' medium; the folding bicycle as the answer to the traffic problems of the contemporary affluent cities) and in our 'era of speed', the container ships at the heart of global trade are now being built to go ever slower, in order to save on fuel costs (and in the most hi-tech shipyards, now designed in a hybridized mode, to partly operate on wind power).

Moreover, while technologies which are new today will, by definition, be 'taken for granted' tomorrow, it is perhaps when they are fully 'naturalized' – and thus invisible – that they are at their most powerful. Here in the rich West, we take for granted a constant and reliable electricity supply, as the invisible premise of the communications technologies we use: a premise that simply cannot be assumed elsewhere. In any case, technological history is no one-way street: the coming of electric light in Western cities in the nineteenth century was, as Schivelbusch (1995) has demonstrated, a historic event, but in many towns in the UK, the global financial crisis is forcing the local authorities to switch off the streetlights overnight, to save money.

In conclusion, if we're looking for a model for the development of media and communications in the future, we might better look to conditions in what will be the mega-cities of tomorrow – in places like Lagos or Mumbai (Koolhaas et al. 2005, Davis 2006), rather than in London, New York or Tokyo. Thus, we may now be well advised to refigure our 'common sense' about the technological pre-conditions of communications, to better correspond to conditions outside the Metropolitan West, if we wish to have things to say which are relevant outside the unusually privileged conditions which still apply in (at least some parts of) those specific socio-geographical areas.

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